Lateral

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On Witnessing a Riot

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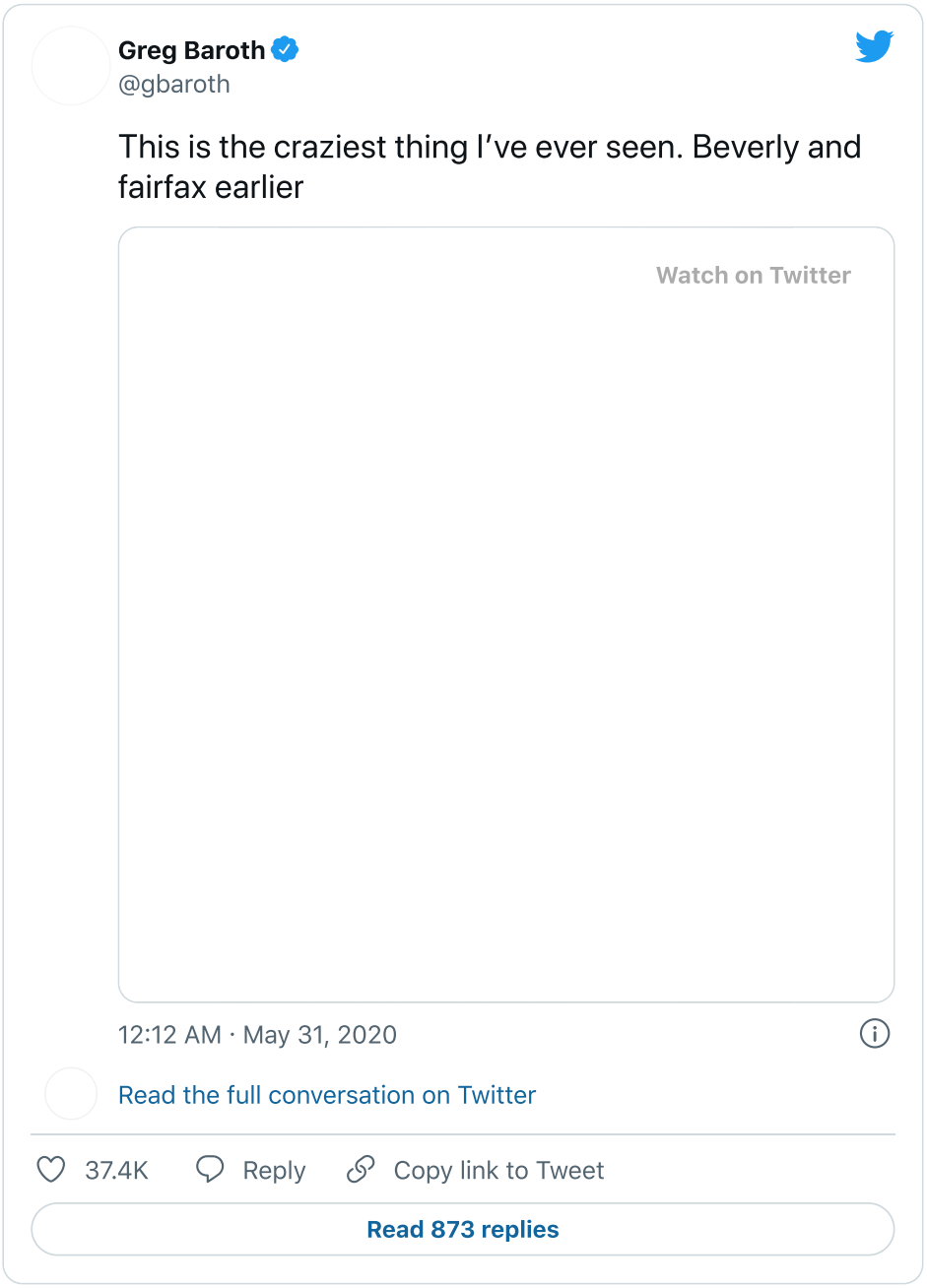
ABSTRACT In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police has sparked protests and riots around the world. The policing of the pandemic reveals the racial biases inherent to law enforcement and state-led discipline, laying bare ongoing infrastructural inequalities that render racialized subjects more vulnerable to premature death at the hands of police and public health systems alike. With the video embedded in the article, we guide readers through thirty-nine seconds of rioting in Los Angeles on May 31, 2020, shot on a mobile phone and circulated virally on Twitter. The affected body of the witness indexes both the intensity of the event and the embodied experience of the witness, establishing a relation between the two. The experiential aesthetics of the video exceeds the content and this affectivity circulates with its mediation and movement through networked platforms. Such forms of affective witnessing allow for an attunement to political struggle that occurs through what Hortense Spillers would call the analytic of the flesh. Thinking at the intersection of Black studies, affect theory, and media studies, we argue that the flesh is an affective register crucial to the building of global anti-racist solidarities towards abolition.

KEYWORDS affect, politics, protest, Los Angeles, riot, abolition, witnessing, mediation

At Fairfax and Beverly

The shaky handheld camera—a cellphone in portrait mode—sweeps left then right then left again as it slowly moves down North Fairfax Avenue in Los Angeles toward the intersection with Beverly Boulevard. Palm trees tower indifferently above the scene, lining the wide street. A billboard for Chase Bank looms ahead. At street level, movement is everywhere: two people run into frame pushing an industrial dumpster down the middle of the street; a pair of cop cars make wild U-turns and lurch dangerously through the intersection looking for an escape route; people hurl bottles and trash and rocks and other objects at the police cars desperately fleeing the scene. The camera spins 180 degrees and shows the remnants of a burnt out police car, tagged with graffiti that reads "FLOYD." Whirling back, a mass of protesters swarms the now-vacant intersection. The camera swings urgently to the left and lingers on a second police car, also burnt, with protestors standing atop holding signs to the sky that declare their dissent. A cacophonous noise builds around the camera as it pans one way and then another, unsure what to focus on in a scene of so many moving parts. Rendered in black and white, this thirty-nine seconds of footage has a cinematic quality, as if it might be the opening shot of a film depicting a revolution in full swing. Beginning with a medium-wide establishing shot, the camera

documents the turbulent scene from its edges. Moving with the rhythm of a body in step, the camera pulls in on the action until it is immersed in the swarm of people and the din of noise. The footage becomes swept up in the mass of the riot, moving with its energy, inseparable from the disorientation and possibility of this organic collectivity.



Greg Baroth (@gbaroth) tweeting an Instagram story from @calebslife posted on May 30, 2020.

Shot and uploaded by an Instagram user and then shared on Twitter on May 31, 2020, the video captures Los Angeles in a state of riot. This riot is one of many that swept through the United States in the wake of the killing of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer

six days earlier. These urban revolts took place as the COVID-19 pandemic was sweeping the world, bringing the global economy to a grinding halt, and reconfiguring social and spatial relations. Yet despite the risk posed by the novel coronavirus, protesters took to the streets *en masse* in acts of collective resistance against racism, which Ruth Wilson Gilmore defines as "the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death."[1] Vulnerability to premature death plays out along race and class lines in relation to both the COVID-19 pandemic and police brutality—lack of access to health infrastructure goes hand-in-hand with the intensification of policing as more and more workers in the deindustrialized economies of the United States are excluded from capitalist modes of production and the conditional safety of the wage relation. Racism is a public health issue that permeates every aspect of the environment. "The weather," writes Christina Sharpe, "is the totality of our environments; the weather is the total climate; and the total climate is antiblack."[2] These uprisings—riots and looting, burning police stations, demands to abolish the police, the building of alternate social infrastructures—respond not only to the constraint of Black life and the killing of Black people, but to the inequity of racial capitalism itself. But what are we to make of these moments of witnessing and their viral circulation? Do they contain an affectivity that enables us to attune to what Raymond Williams termed the "structure of feeling" of the moment we are living in? And how might this attunement to affective forces and intensities relate to the emergence of a revolutionary subject intent on the abolition of racial capitalism?

Affective Witnessing

Captured in the footage is a state of excess, intensities spilling and sparking between bodies in motion as they enter and leave the frame. "Things flash up," writes Kathleen Stewart, "events alive with some kind of charge."[3] What else is this but the flashing up of the charged event, caught in saturated black and white, in the familiar vertical frame of the smartphone, released into the wildness of the digital? What do we witness in these furious, excessive seconds? Things that might be read as signifiers—cop car, masked face, surging bodies—whip through the scene, never at rest, always tipping over into the next fierce trajectory, giving way to other bodies, objects, constellations. Witnessing here is affective: the witnessing of affect and affect as the modality of witnessing itself.[4] As the frame swings from side to side, slowing in response to clusters of objects and bodies, as it drives forward towards the intersection with Beverly Boulevard, it carries with it the embodied relation to the scene of the cameraperson: an urgent presence, a being affected by the vital frenzy of so much matter, energy, and noise coursing through place. Mediated by the affordances of the camera, by the rendering into black and white, by its circulations on Instagram and then Twitter, this thirty-nine seconds of footage testifies to the surging affects of the scene, of being pulled toward and into the crowd.

The aesthetics of this event raises the stakes of the scene and renders it cinematic, even before its politics arrive in wailing sirens, burnt out cars, throbbing bodies. Here is subject formation in action, but with no narrowing down to the individual, no diminishment of the collective. "Like a live wire, the subject channels what's going on around it in the process

of its own self-composition," writes Stewart. "Formed by the coagulation of intensities, surfaces, sensations, perceptions, and expressions, it's a thing composed of encounters and the spaces and events it traverses or inhabits."[5] In the oscillations and lingerings of the camera, the footage stands in for this co-composition of the witnessing subject who holds the phone but it also captures the coalescence and co-composition of the collectivity of the crowd into which the witness dissolves—a riotous, swarming agency set against the state.

Liked and retweeted thousands of times, the clip slides into our Twitter feeds on the other side of the world: Bidjigal, Gadigal, and Wangal Country in Sydney, Australia, in the last days of pandemic lockdown. We watch it from a distance, far removed from the riot unfolding in those streets, but with protests for Blak Indigenous life[6] taking shape in our own body politic. Made possible by mobile technologies, global infrastructures, and proprietary algorithms that are the product of racial capitalism, distributed and mediated witnessing is now the norm. Yet this snippet of footage does something in excess of what we have come to expect from content that is uploaded and circulated on social media platforms. It is more than witnessing that takes place in and through media[7] or even citizen witnessing[8] that captures the affectedness of the witness: its mediation is vital, corporeal, and co-produced with the affectivity of the scene itself. If witnessing is about the forging of responsibility to an event,[9] then what binds witnesses to *this* moment is not the specificity of an element nor any semantic content that might be decoded but its untethered intensities, its politics roaring into view as visceral, material, emergent. The footage moves beyond mere representation or illustration and instead captures something of the forces and intensities that move in and through the scene captured in the frame. If the video itself serves as a kind of testimony, our belated witnessing is exceeded or overwhelmed by the immediacy with which it returns to the relational composition of the unruly, untameable event.

The Affectability of Flesh

Gilles Deleuze called the experience of something acting "immediately upon the nervous system, which is of the flesh" the "logic of sensation."[10] His object of study is a Francis Bacon painting, *Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X*, which captures its pontifical subject screaming in a state of anguish. For Deleuze, the scream is the result of invisible and insensible forces that bear down on the body and move in excess of the spectacular scene of suffering to which the scream might be causally linked. The power of Bacon's painting is that it captures the scream itself rather than the horror and violence that produce it, and in the encounter with the painting one feels something of the affective forces that conditioned this scream. The logic of sensation, then, moves us toward a pathic mode of perception that precedes discursive signification. A similar intensity animates the scene at North Fairfax and Beverly. We find ourselves attuned to the forces that quicken the collective body moving in riot and refusal before we have the opportunity to reflect on what we are watching and what it might mean. The footage constitutes what Deleuze called an "operative field," one in which affective forces and intensities come together in a single compositional plane to produce an aesthetic experience: witnessing.[11]

Such an attunement to the way racial capitalism produces structures and social relations that makes some lives more vulnerable to premature death than others can be thought through Hortense Spillers's conception of flesh.[12] Spillers argues that the violent processes of the Middle Passage stripped the enslaved of personhood and reduced them to undifferentiated flesh. Spillers focuses on the figure of the Black female slave, showing how racializing assemblages that emerge with the colonial world-making project are also processes of ungendering that seek to disrupt the kinship bond between mother and child, a disruption that is central to the transformation of enslaved subjects into commodity objects. This transformation from body to flesh strips the slave of the capacity to signify, according to Enlightenment markers of subjectivity. As such, flesh is rendered undifferentiated matter that can be dominated, disciplined, and subjugated. The violent disciplining of the flesh that the comes with the transatlantic slave trade sets out to destroy communal bonds and separate the enslaved into individual bodies that can be objectified and accounted for. The distinction between body and flesh, writes Spillers, is "the central one between captive and liberated subject-positions."[13] She continues, "before the 'body' there is the 'flesh,' that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography." The analytic of flesh makes material the abstractions of race, writing the conceptual fictions of racial hierarchy onto the flesh with whips and chains. "If we think of the 'flesh' as a primary narrative," Spillers tells us, "then we mean its seared, divided, ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship's hole, fallen, or 'escaped' overboard."[14] Crucially, for Spillers, the flesh carries a hieroglyphic imprint or memory that is passed down from one generation to another.

Flesh also precedes the body that belongs to a symbolic order bound to Western modernity—the body of Man. As such, flesh also comes before the racializing grammar such a body implies. The body that is made to signify Enlightenment subjectivity is imposed upon the flesh and this imposition draws our attention to the presence of the flesh itself. The paradox of flesh is that it cannot be erased (and so bears the trace of racial violence) at the same time that it precedes the body (and so offers an escape from violence of Western modernity). Flesh is matter that cannot be erased or stilled and, as such, can be understood as a relation of affectability. Flesh registers forces of sensation that precede the discursive, flesh is that which gives us the capacity to feel for and with others, flesh is inherently relational and social. It is not merely a zone of exclusion but a condition of possibility that foregrounds affective attunement in ways that might allow us to feel our way collectively toward an alternate conception of humanity. Building on Spillers' thought, Alexander Weheliye writes that "the particular assemblage of humanity under purview here is habeas viscus, which, in contrast to bare life, insists on the importance of miniscule movements, glimmers of hope, scraps of food, the interrupted dreams of freedom found in those spaces deemed devoid of full human life."[15]

After Optimism

In the small slice of footage that we are focused on, we see these miniscule movements and glimmers of hope irrupt into the collective formation of a riot. We witness flesh

attuning to flesh, forming a collective body that moves against the logic of individuation and against the systematic devaluation of Black (social) life that is still the weather of the present. Yet this present cannot be understood as already formed and the social cannot be reduced to fixed forms that remain stable and static. Rather, the social must be understood as always emerging, and so demands modes of thinking capable of attending to that which is still in formation. "The present," writes Lauren Berlant, "is perceived, first, affectively: the present is what makes itself present to us before it becomes anything else, such as an orchestrated collective event or an epoch on which we can look back."[16] How, then, might we understand the structures of feeling of this moment? And what does this footage show us about the importance of thought as feeling and feeling as thought?

In this footage we feel the irruption of a politics of immanence and movement that sweeps individuals into a collective body that rises against the state. We feel the vibrational intensity of this expression of refusal, attune to the bodies as they shout, scream, smash windows, torch cop cars, and demand abolition. But this footage also shows us something about the way that a shared historical horizon can produce what Raymond Williams called "structures of feeling," those "changes of presence" that are "emergent or pre-emergent" and therefore "do not have to await definition, classification, or rationalization before they exert palpable pressures and set effective limits on experience and action."[17] Almost a decade ago, Berlant famously redeployed Williams's concept to describe our attachments to an idea of the "good life" that was becoming increasingly unattainable under neoliberal capitalism. She identified this structure as the relation of "cruel optimism": an "attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possible, and toxic."[18] Cruel optimism describes our continued affective investment in upward mobility, in the promise of stable jobs, nuclear families, the liberation that comes with owning property, and the political systems, institutions, and free markets that surround and support such norms, even as those very things were being continuously eroded by the neoliberal order. But what of those subjects whose lives were never structured by attachments of cruel optimism in the first place? And what if cruel optimism is giving way to as yet undefined structures of feeling as the certainties of late capitalism dissolve even more?

The shared historical horizon that leads to these thirty-nine seconds of footage can be traced back to the 1970s, which Joshua Clover describes as the beginning of the "Long Crisis."[19] The intensive process of deindustrialisation that begins in this period has produced a crisis for capital that has resulted in the production of what Karl Marx termed "relative surplus populations." Historically capital has resolved the crisis of overaccumulation by seeking out new locations where production has yet to reach a tipping point and can therefore be reinvested so accumulation can begin again. The Long Crisis is, in part, defined by the failure of capital to restabilize, which has had the effect of pushing more and more workers outside of, or adjacent to the wage relation. Rendered surplus to the capitalist cycle of economic reproduction, the state steps in and manages such populations through disciplinary measures such as policing and incarceration, but also through the diffuse and differently effective management of feelings that maintain attachments to the system against all odds. This short piece of footage hints at the emergent potential of a structure of feeling that is more collective and urgent than cruel

optimism: a brick through a window, a police station on fire, an abolitionist commons, a collective chant.

In the midst of the unravelling of the neoliberal dream and the dissolution of the viability of cruel optimism as the sustaining affective formation of its undelivered promises, and as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to wreak havoc on the world, the question remains open as to what structure of feeling might shape and be shaped by whatever replaces the failed project of neoliberalism. One response to the pandemic has been a push to return as quickly as possible to "normal life," a phrase used to describe a pre-pandemic world structured by the rolling crises of capitalism in its post-industrial and increasingly circulatory phase. In the invocation of a return to "normality," there is an attempt to flatten the riots of 2020 and subsume them within a liberal narrative in which the conviction of Derek Chauvin is pointed to as evidence of justice served. While it is too soon to say what the legacy of these riots will be, outbreaks of collective politics such as those captured in these thirty-nine seconds hold out the possibility of a prefigurative affective structure, a structure of feeling rooted in collective relations against the delimiting of life demanded by the state: a structure of feeling that dissolves oppressions instead of sustaining them. And yet because a moment of radical contestation is always open to intervention by the forces of reaction, the potential of this collectivity has its counterpoint in phalanxed police lines, in the armed militias of Proud Boys and the sprawling conspiracies of QAnon. Berlant again: "History is what has hurt and it continues to make shadow lines, and we are always in the haze of the present, sensing new repetitions-to-be, some of which can be willed, others of which remain enigmatic."[20] As the present in which we find ourselves turns to tumult, as the weather—that "total climate" which Sharpe describes as "antiblack"—gathers storm clouds, the riot offers the possibility for the collective thinking-feeling-living of an otherwise. Such an otherwise begins not with a program of reform and institution building but with the irruption of wild affect that has as its animating relational force a collective surge towards liberation. A surge that pulls the witness down the road, past rolling refuse and fleeing police, towards the crowd as it hurtles towards an undefined future.

Notes

1. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 28. ↩

2. Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 104. ↩

3. Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 68. ↩

4. Michael Richardson and Kerstin Schankweiler, "Affective Witnessing," in *Affective Societies: Key Concepts*, edited by Jan Slaby and Christian von Scheve (London; New York: Routledge, 2019). ↩

5. Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, 79. ↩

6. This term is one that First Nations people in the settler-colony of Australia use to describe Blak Indigeneity. Also subjected to racializing processes that produce the Blackness as a category,

the terminology both creates a link between other histories of global Blackness while acknowledging the differences between them.

7. Paul Frosh and Amit Pinchevski, "Introduction: Why Media Witnessing? Why Now?" in *Media Witnessing: Testimony in the Age of Mass Communication*, edited by Paul Frosh and Amit Pinchevski (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 1–19.
8. Kari Andén-Papadopoulos, "Citizen Camera-Witnessing: Embodied Political Dissent in the Age of 'Mediated Mass Self-Communication'," *New Media & Society* 16, no. 5 (2014): 753–69, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444813489863 < https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444813489863> .
9. John Durham Peters, "Witnessing," *Media, Culture & Society* 23, no. 6 (2001): 707–23, https://doi.org/10.1177/016344301023006002 < https://doi.org/10.1177/016344301023006002> .
10. Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 24.
11. Deleuze, *Logic*, 2.
12. Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 65–81, https://doi.org/10.2307/464747 < https://doi.org/10.2307/464747> .
13. Spillers, "Mama's Baby," 67.
14. Spillers, "Mama's Baby," 67.
15. Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 12.
16. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 4.
17. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 132.
18. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 1.
19. Joshua Clover, *Riot. Strike. Riot: The New Era of Uprisings* (New York: Verso, 2016), 130.
20. Berlant, Cruel Optimism, 157.

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View all of Andrew Brooks's articles.

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